

Indy Race Car

One of the great things about being a professional photographer is that I've been able to experience a lot of things that most people never get to do. I've flown in a helicopter to an offshore oil rig in Alaska, been inside a factory to see how they make Klondike bars, and photographed the US representative to the United Nations at the Waldorf Astoria in New York.

And sometimes I just get to do fun things for free. In 2011 I pitched an idea to a local magazine about taking a ride in an Indy 500 style race car. It's a tourist attraction at Disney that you can pay for, but I figured I could get a ride at no cost because it would give them free publicity in a publication. I was right.

I arrived at the track at the appointed time and was given the choice of driving a car myself or being in a two-seater model, sitting behind a professional driver. If you took the option to drive yourself, you had to follow a pace car that had colored lights on the back facing you. As long as you kept up with the pace car within a certain distance, the lights would remain green and you could go as fast as you wanted. If you started to fall behind, the pace car would notice that and slow down with you. I watched a few other guys ahead of me who drove themselves and thought they were going really fast, only to finish and realize they barely made it to 90 miles an hour. I decided to go with a pro driver to see what it would feel like to go really fast.

Let me say here that I am not a thrill seeker. I don't like roller coasters, I don't like fast cars, and I'm not into racing. I'm just curious, and that sometimes gets me into trouble.

It all seemed like fun and games until I had to fill out the consent forms. I've seen a lot of these over the years and they're all pretty standard, but this one was page after page of lawyerly documents, virtually signing my life away. I know for sure that they asked for my physician's name and phone number and I think they asked for my favorite funeral home as well. That last part might be an exaggeration, but still, the forms were scary.

Then came the protective clothing: fireproof suit, and fireproof boots, and fireproof gloves. I was beginning to think they were trying to tell me something.

Next, it was time to meet my driver. He looked like he could have been an astronaut or a test pilot; no blood-shot eyes or trembling hands. I felt good about that.

At this point they told me that I was not going to be able to bring my camera into the car with me, which I thought was ridiculous and them being way too cautious. Boy was I wrong.

There's a photo of me stepping into the vehicle, looking all cocky and confident, but that didn't last very long.

Once you actually sit down inside the thing, and get buckled in every which way, it feels as if your butt is just inches from the ground. There is no glass on the sides nor covers to the tires, and you feel as if you're in a go-cart, sitting right on the tarmac. Because of this closeness to the ground and general exposure to the elements, the feeling of speed is intense.

We started out on a straight path and went around the first corner in what seemed to be a fast, but reasonable pace. At this point I was thinking that having my camera wouldn't have been a problem. We were just getting started, and my driver kept going faster and faster.

I realized we were coming up to the next turn on this oval track and I thought for sure I would hear him slowing down in order to make the turn. This was not a huge race course with steep banked turns, as I had seen once while photographing the Daytona 500. He just kept going faster, right through the turn, and even though the logical, front of my brain was telling me, "everything's going to be just fine, you're with an experienced driver and he knows exactly what he's doing", the old, mammalian, deeply recessed part of my brain was screaming, "there's a reason you had to fill out all those forms, there's no way these tires can hold, we're going to flip, roll, and turn into a ball of flames, and they'll have to identify you by your dental records!" Not only was my entire body smashed against the right side of the car, but I could feel my cheeks being pulled that way as well. There was no way in hell I could've even held my camera, much less taken a photo.

This went on for turn after turn, each one seemingly faster than the last. I was beginning to think my driver was just messing with me to see how bad he could scare me. They had originally told me this experience would only last for three laps, and I remember thinking that seemed like a pitifully short period of time. I can honestly tell you I don't believe I could've stayed conscious for much more.

When we finally came to a stop, all that confidence and cockiness had been completely drained from my body. I was exhausted, relieved, and also slightly thrilled.

We had averaged 133 mph, and the driver said he goes much faster than that when actually racing. I have to admit I'd never had a high regard for race car drivers. It looked easy to me on television - people just making a bunch of left turns around a track. What we did was truly frightening, and we were by ourselves. I can't imagine going even faster and then racing other cars.

Like many things I've done in my life, I'm glad I did it, but I have no desire to try it again.



Before



After